

## **Altgeld Hall**

Alex Zhai  
*University High School, Urbana*  
*Teacher: Adele Suslick*

Part of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus, Altgeld Hall blends architectural style and history. Funded primarily by Governor John P. Altgeld's support, the building originally served as the university's library. Later, it also housed the law school building and is currently the mathematics department building. Crafted with stunning detail, Altgeld Hall is thought of as one of the most impressive Romanesque structures in the Midwest. The building's expertly built central rotunda and the immense bell tower appended to the main structure, as well as the distinctively Romanesque features displayed, make it worthy of this reputation.

In 1892, John P. Altgeld was elected as governor of Illinois. Altgeld believed that it was important to establish good public universities so that those with little money could afford a good education; therefore, he became actively involved in aiding the University of Illinois. Among countless other contributions, Altgeld proposed the construction of a library, to be named Library Hall. The University eventually renamed it Altgeld Hall to acknowledge the Governor's tremendous support for the building's construction and the university at large. Altgeld himself became involved in the design, which was originally to be a castle-like structure but later changed to a more affordable Richardsonian Romanesque style.

Nathan C. Ricker and James M. White, both architecture professors of the University, designed Altgeld Hall. The design consisted of a massive main building, built of large stone blocks with an attached bell tower that rose above most of its surroundings. Begun in 1896, Altgeld Hall was finished in 1897, and it was a major addition to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. "We shall now go into the finest building on the grounds, the Library Building [Altgeld Hall]," were the admiring words of University of Illinois President

Andrew S. Draper in an address six years after the completion. These words reflect the building's lasting significance.



**Altgeld Hall, Urbana. Courtesy of the Illinois State Historical Library, Mary Michals, Iconographer.**

The predominant sources of Draper's reverence are easily realized upon visiting the building. Before entering, one can see the Richardsonian Romanesque designs that are used throughout. Romanesque architecture, as its name implies, is modeled after Roman architecture. Henry Hobson Richardson gave birth to the Richardsonian Romanesque style, adding his own nuances to the original Romanesque style. Some important concepts in Richardsonian Romanesque architecture are semi-circular arches, heavy masonry, rough-cut stone exteriors, and asymmetrically placed towers, turrets, chimneys, and other protrusions. Altgeld Hall exposes a rough-cut stone exterior built of large blocks and uses the arch in almost every opening on the outside. Its appended bell tower rises six stories high, a typical display of asymmetry and size in Richardsonian Romanesque buildings.

In the main structure, the central rotunda's lofty ceiling and the four great murals sprawled across it are truly spectacles to behold. The murals, entitled “The Sacred Wood of the Muses,” “Arcadia,” “The Laboratory of Minerva,” and “The Forge of Vulcan,” represent the four

schools of the University of Illinois at the time of construction, Literature and Arts Agriculture, Science, and Engineering, respectively. At one time a stained-glass dome above the central rotunda shed celestial illumination upon the grand room. Before additions divided it, the rotunda connected to two flanking study rooms through open arches, creating a long expanse of open space. Even in its small decorations, however, the building has an amazing effect. The intricate detail with which motifs are meticulously carved make Altgeld Hall a swirl of artistic beauty. The building appears somewhat a labyrinth of corridors, but the solid, flat floors and circular staircases used in the original building seem to guide one through the building, unlike much of more modern architecture, with sharp, crisp turns and angles.

Unfortunately, additions to Altgeld Hall made in 1914, 1919, 1926, and 1956 deviate from the original style. Although they still maintain a heavy stone floor, then-plain, white walls lack the artistic emphasis of the original building and detract from the building's stylistic consistency. In addition, the separation of the central rotunda from one of the study rooms and the replacement of the stained glass with plaster has reduced the powerful continuity and congruity that Altgeld Hall once had.

Aside from its architectural significance, though, Altgeld Hall is also important as a piece of history. It was the University's first building specifically used as a library. After Altgeld Hall's completion, the University of Illinois' library began to rapidly expand. Within eleven years of the building's completion in 1897, the University of Illinois already needed another library. The University of Illinois has now one of the continent's largest-libraries.

Over time, as more buildings equipped with better technology have been constructed, Altgeld Hall has declined in practical importance to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; however, it symbolizes the university's growth with Governor John P. Altgeld's

support, from a small, unrenowned college to become one of the nation's prominent schools.

Altgeld Hall is a building worth preserving for decades to come, not only for its aesthetic beauty and practical use, but also for its historic importance. [From *Altgeld Hall Centennial*

*Celebration: 1897-1997*; Mallory B.E. Baches, "A Matter of Style: Richardsonian Romanesque,"

[http://www.tndtownpaper.com/Volume5/richardsonian\\_romanescque.htm](http://www.tndtownpaper.com/Volume5/richardsonian_romanescque.htm), (Nov. 16, 2003);

"Building Additions,"

[http://heng.grainger.uiuc.edu/history/altgeld/Floorplans/Library\\_Hall/floorplans.htm](http://heng.grainger.uiuc.edu/history/altgeld/Floorplans/Library_Hall/floorplans.htm) (Nov. 14,

2003); Anna, Flanagan, "A True Friend of the University,"

<http://www.uiua.org/urbana/illinoisalumni/utxt0203c.html> (Nov. 4, 2003); Christopher L. Marx,

Altgeld Hall Architectural History,

<http://www.uiuc.edu/navigation/buildings/altgeld.history.html> (Oct. 30, 2003); Muriel

Scheinman, *A Guide to Art at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Robert Allerton*

*Park, and Chicago.*]